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Student Choice as an Effective Learning Strategy

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For many undergraduates, history courses are uninteresting citing the irrelevancy of historical topics and begrudging the need to meet general education requirements (Wineburg, 2001). Student complaints may be based on the traditional methods of teaching survey history courses, specifically the exclusive use of multiple choice exams for assessment. This instructor-centered approach is convenient but does not actively engage students in the discovery and construction of knowledge. In contrast, learning-centered approaches actively involve students directly in course material. Researchers have noted that collaborative classrooms in which students participate in the design of class materials leads to greater engagement in course material, increased intrinsic



motivation, and more immediate immersion in the learning process (Starnes & Carone, 2002). Student-designed assignments are created to shift students from the role of “individual consumers of education to co-creators of a common life” in the classroom (Rinehart, 1999, p. 219).

To create a learner-centered, student-collaborative environment, I implemented “student choice” projects in my survey of history of dress class and 20th century fashion history course. For their final class assignment, students select from a list of 3-possible project types: a traditional research paper based on primary and/or secondary sources, an oral history report, or a portfolio of student illustrations based on historical images. Students deliver their projects in their choice of several formats including a term paper, an electronic or paper portfolio, or a Website. The goal is for students to deepen their learning about methods of research and details about a selected subject in fashion history (McGinnis, 2007).

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available funding, even very good proposals don’t get funded. Furthermore, if the odds are considered it is perhaps more strategic to write manuscripts for journal submissions than grant proposals. Universities and current budget situations offer strong reasons for seeking external support of research. Writing and submitting a proposal generates comments or scoring for improved re-submission. Though this process takes considerable time, there is no better way to learn to write a successful grant proposal than by writing and submitting. Further conversation with the agency program directors may offer insight as to how the proposal can be revised and resubmitted for the next round. So, the odds for securing funding improve with communication followed by revisions or possibly a redirection of the research approach. University tenure and promotion committees usually give credit for grant submissions whether or not the proposal was funded.

This review of five fundamentals for grant writing covers many complex issues that often stymie researchers. In sum, it is often not the idea that is lacking but the way in which the idea is presented that prevents funding. Make time an asset in grant writing by starting early and asking others for feedback. For the advancement of scholars in all areas of textiles and apparel, an environment of critical reviewing should be further cultivated. Professional development should include asking difficult questions or offering guidance when we are formally or informally reviewing written as well as verbal presentations of each other’s scholarship.

References

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To assess the effectiveness of the student choice projects in promoting student learning, I created an anonymous survey posted on WebCT. Students responded on a likert-type scale from 1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree the extent to which the student choice project impacted their learning. Four semesters of student responses (n=244) indicated that the student choice project encouraged greater understanding in course material (m=4.39); encouraged students to work hard to master the material (m=4.32), and to gain greater interest in the subject (m=4.28). Student comments supported these findings:

- ➡ “It was a relief to get a choice; we focused on something of interest that will be able to apply later.”
- ➡ “I learned a ton about the subject and how to use the library and other resources.”
- ➡ “This was my favorite.... It allowed me to focus on a specific time and use my creative skills to illustrate designs inspired by that period.”

Allowing students the choice to select the topic of their final project automatically increased student involvement in their learning as they were responsible for finding an idea and formulating a plan for completing their research. By their very nature, the student choice projects were personalized to meet each individual student's interests, needs, and capabilities. Due to the high quality of the student choice projects, students have included them in professional portfolios, graduate school applications, and even university-sponsored and peer-reviewed conferences.

Based on my experiences, I would recommend the following for instructors interested in implementing student choice projects:

- ➡ Provide three to five general project types and then develop specific guidelines that the students can follow. In this way students are free to select the topic of interest and the

instructor is able to create a limited number of rubrics for assessment purposes.

- ⇒ Recognize student choice projects are time-intensive for the instructor. It is advisable for the instructor to meet with each student to guide them in the narrowing (or broadening) of their research topic and to assist in the acquisition of resources.
- ⇒ Require a first draft or abstract with a resource list from the students to ensure there are a variety of project types, subjects, and that the students are utilizing appropriate sources.

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Rinehart, J. A. (1999). Turning theory into theorizing: Collaborative learning in a sociological theory course. *Teaching Sociology*, 27, 216-232.

